

LEADERSHIP: A CHALLENGING COURSE
Paul Vallas in New Orleans
Episode 2: Facing a Tough Road to Rebuilding
Airdate: November 23, 2007

TRANSCRIPT

PAUL VALLAS, Superintendent, New Orleans Recovery School District: ... because she set that bar high. And if you set the bar high, the higher you set it, the higher your children are going to perform.

JOHN MERROW, NewsHour Special Correspondent: Ever since arriving in New Orleans in July, school superintendent Paul Vallas has been on the move. He spends a good part of each day building support in the community.

PAUL VALLAS: We are currently trying to secure enough money to, in effect, do 40 renovations over the next couple of years.

JOHN MERROW: And making sweeping changes in the classroom.

PAUL VALLAS: Well, let's think about how we do math. Kids who struggle in reading often move much faster in math.

JOHN MERROW: It's a whirlwind schedule for the 53-year-old Vallas.

PAUL VALLAS: My day will usually begin about 7:30 in the morning, particularly if I'm doing a school visit. And my day will usually end about -- an early day for me is 6:30. A late day for me is 9:30, 10:00.

JOHN MERROW: After successful, if controversial, appointments running the much larger Chicago and Philadelphia school systems, Paul Vallas was brought in to rescue the state-run Recovery School District, 60 schools, 12,000 students.

The people of New Orleans expect a lot from him.

KARRAN HARPER ROYAL, Recovery School District Advisory Committee: We know the key to rebuilding our community is getting great schools in our neighborhoods.

JOHN MERROW: New Orleans parent Karran Harper Royal serves on the Recovery School District advisory committee.

KARRAN HARPER ROYAL: I know many people who have not come home to New Orleans yet because the schools are not up and running in many of our most devastated neighborhoods. If you build a wonderful school, bricks and mortar, great program, the community supporting it, people will begin to come back.

JOHN MERROW: Building strong schools is at the heart of Vallas' plan. He's working with a budget of almost \$250 million, a mix of state funding and federal restart monies.

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PAUL VALLAS: We did a great job preparing those buildings to the best of our ability. I mean, the buildings are clean and painted, and the bathrooms have been repaired, and the hot lunches and all that. The technology in the classrooms, the new textbooks, the modern furniture, I think all of these things are making for a better learning environment.

JOHN MERROW: Emboldened by his early accomplishments, Vallas is feeling confident.

PAUL VALLAS: If within two years this district has not significantly improved, if I have not achieved 90 percent of what I've promised, then, you know, by right, you know, they should put me on the Amtrak and send me back home to Chicago.

Dealing with logistics

JOHN MERROW: While many of Paul Vallas' initiatives got off to a smooth start, there have been bumps along the way. Some schools have been having problems since day one. At Rabouin High School, Vallas' largest school, glitches in the district's new computerized scheduling system led to chaos on opening day.

KADY AMUNDSON, Teacher, Rabouin High School: We kind of came on the first day, and we found out that morning that there'd just been a huge problem. Literally everyone kept coming in and saying, "I have your class, I have your class, I have your class." And I'm thinking, how in the world do I have 40 kids that have biology fifth period?

JOHN MERROW: A solution was slow in coming.

TEACHER: At this time, I need any student that has not received a schedule to the auditorium.

JOHN MERROW: Revised schedules did little to remedy the situation, and problems continued well into October.

DELTRICE CARROLL, Student, Rabouin High School: I had, like, four different schedules this year. It just hasn't been right for me.

ADRIENELL BOYD, Principal, Rabouin High School: The problem came from poor record-keeping on behalf of whomever, however. There's no schedules. There's kids running all over. One day you have one student, and the next day you don't. And it's frustrating for any teacher.

PAUL VALLAS: I think we've had more problems at Rabouin in part because of what was not done last year. Last year, there was no effort made to update the student records. We have such a large number of children who are in this system or who have just returned to the

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system and yet, if there are records -- and that's a big if -- those records are out of date, those records are not accurate.

JOHN MERROW: The scheduling confusion aggravated another problem, one with deep roots in the community.

KADY AMUNDSON: It's kind of engrained in New Orleans school system that attendance is not a huge priority. Four days a week is a good week.

AMANDA SIAS, Teacher, Rabouin High School: Ranisha, Patricia, Bernard, and that's it, so that's a total of 10 out of 30.

You have kids who don't think education is important. You have kids who come from families who don't push the issue about getting to school on time or even getting to school at all. So I think it's the apathy in the home/community environment.

Tackling disciplinary issues

JOHN MERROW: Many students who did come to school seemed to spend much of the day wandering the halls and reporting late to class.

TEACHER: All of you have passed geometry?

JOHN MERROW: With the administration focused on scheduling problems, teachers were on their own.

TEACHER: Right now, handling students that are acting out is a little bit difficult. Since we're still sorting through the schedules, our school-wide discipline hasn't been as concrete and solid as it should be.

JOHN MERROW: Elsewhere in the district, Vallas said, his initiatives were helping to control discipline problems.

PAUL VALLAS: I think schools have been very calm. You know, we've had a couple fights, a couple boy fights, girl fights. But I think the fact that the schools are relatively small and the fact that the class sizes are so small, it's made the school management much easier.

JOHN MERROW: Although many classes at Rabouin were meeting Vallas' 25 to 1 student-teacher ratio, that wasn't enough to solve the discipline problem.

ADRIENELL BOYD: There was too much confusion yesterday. Total chaos, drove me bananas yesterday.

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JOHN MERROW: Principal Adriennell Boyd had to take action.

ADRIENELL BOYD: This morning, I had to crack down on the number of tardy students. I crack down every day, but today was the day I really put my foot down, because I had 87 tardy students. We wrote down the names of each student, and they will be assigned an after-school detention. After three tardies, they will face a one-day out of school suspension.

JOHN MERROW: But Vallas would rather see students punished on school grounds.

PAUL VALLAS: Students that are chronically tardy or chronically absent, you know, sending them home for four or five other days, four or five more days is not going to solve the problem.

Expanding after-school programs

JOHN MERROW: In fact, Vallas hopes that by keeping students in school longer discipline problems will begin to decrease.

PAUL VALLAS: The challenge for us is to try to compensate for what's missing at home, and that means you keep the schools open longer. You provide the children with three meals a day. You know, you expand the number of social services that you can provide the children at the local level.

JOHN MERROW: The faculty and staff at Rabouin are already trying to make their school a place students want to be. Even with facilities still under repair, after-school activities are being brought back, and they've invited parents and families to potluck dinners at the school.

This year, for the first time, the school has a football team. Other sports are being introduced, as well. Tim Betts is the athletic director and the school's disciplinarian.

TIM BETTS, Athletic Director and Disciplinarian, Rabouin High School: What these sports do is give these kids an alternative to negative behavior. We have a couple of students that were problems last year, and this year they're involved in the basketball, as well as the football. And, absolutely, we have had no problems out of those students. And I think some of their grades have actually gone up.

MICHAEL GLOVER, Student, Rabouin High School: I thought I was going to wind up dropping out, but I like it here now. I'm on the basketball team. I'm doing good, making good grades. My mom's proud of me. That's all. I'm trying to do the right thing.

JOHN MERROW: But it will take more than sports to improve academic performance. Results of the district's first set of benchmark tests, measuring student proficiency, recently came in. About 80 percent of students performed below grade-level.

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PAUL VALLAS: The slotted time for extended day will be 3:30 to 5:00.

JOHN MERROW: Paul Vallas has a plan for that, too.

PAUL VALLAS: The next big challenge is extended day. For our children who are underperforming, they'll be in school beyond the 5:00 hour, and they'll be in school through July.

Those children, when you include after-school extended day programs, will be spending over four hours a day on reading, language arts, writing, reading comprehension, vocabulary, and they'll be spending up to two hours a day on mathematics. There is an absolute direct correlation between the amount of instructional time on task and student progress.

JOHN MERROW: Six weeks into the school year, Rabouin's scheduling problems were finally resolved and teachers could turn their attention to the job at hand: teaching. That week also saw the beginning of one of Paul Vallas' biggest initiatives for raising test scores. All 4,400 high school students in the district received their own laptop computers, free.

PAUL VALLAS: That simple act, putting that computer in the hands of that child, and allowing that child to take that computer home was our statement of confidence and optimism about the potential of that child. That's what it's about. That's what it's about.

JOHN MERROW: Speaking to the city's religious leaders, Paul Vallas couldn't help boasting a bit.

PAUL VALLAS: You can't really use the computer to access the Internet or whatever it is. It's really kind of protected and things like that. It took the kids 20 minutes to hack into the computers, 20 minutes. Don't tell me that our inner-city kids are not the brightest kids on the block, because they are.

JOHN MERROW: Small steps keep Vallas upbeat. By mid-November, the voluntary extended day program was in place at all schools in the district. Although test scores show that 80 percent of students need the extra help, so far only one-third have enrolled. At Rabouin High School, the percentage is even lower.